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RECORD-SETTING DROUGHT, HEAT WAVE HAVE BROAD IMPLICATIONS

Summary
The worst drought in more than a half-century and the months-long heat wave have broad social and economic implications, both nationally and in New Mexico. Higher utility, food and road repair costs, burdensome agricultural losses, more and bigger wildfires and decreased tourism are just some of the fallout. Policymakers can expect demands for more money for drought assistance and water system improvements, as well as water conservation and fire prevention proposals.

The numbers surrounding the drought and blistering heat are as stark as the images.

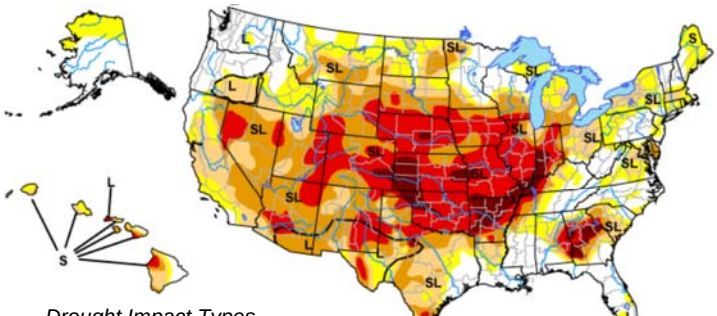
More than 60 percent of the United States is in a drought, and more than 1,450 counties, nearly one-half of all counties in the United States, have been declared disaster areas this year due to the drought. All of New Mexico is experiencing a drought, and in parts of each of the state's 33 counties (except tiny Los Alamos County), the drought is classified as severe or extreme.

July was the hottest month on record for the continental United States, with an average temperature across the lower 48 states of 77.6 degrees Fahrenheit – 3.3 degrees above the twentieth-century average, according to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The previous high mark had been set in July 1936 during the Dust Bowl era. The first seven months of 2012 and the 12 months that ended in July 2012 were the warmest of any periods since recordkeeping began in 1895 and were drier than average as well, according to the NOAA.

Santa Fe "River", August 2012

The consequences of this drought are likely to be extensive and long-lasting, well beyond the end of the drought, whenever that might be.

CURRENT U.S. AND NEW MEXICO DROUGHT CONDITIONS



Drought Impact Types

Delineates dominant impacts

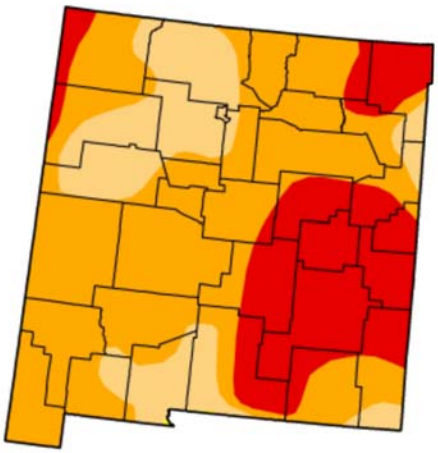
S = Short-Term, typically <6 months (e.g., agriculture, grasslands)

L = Long-Term, typically >6 months (e.g., hydrology, ecology)

Intensity

- D0 Abnormally Dry
- D1 Drought - Moderate
- D2 Drought - Severe
- D3 Drought - Extreme
- D4 Drought - Exceptional

Source: http://droughtmonitor.unl.edu/, accessed 8/10/12.



Source: http://www.srh.noaa.gov/abq/?n=drought, accessed 8/10/12.

Across the Midwest, tens of thousands of fish — shovelnose sturgeon, catfish, carp, bass and other species, including endangered species — have died as temperatures soar and water levels drop.

High water temperatures forced a central Illinois power plant to temporarily shut down one of its generators and a northeastern Illinois power plant to seek permission to continue operating.

In Phoenix, record heat and growing population pushed demand for electricity to a record high 6,665 megawatts on August 8 between 4:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m., shattering a record set just six years ago. More than 3,000 heat records were broken across the country in July, raising customer demand for power to run air conditioners and putting additional stress on already overtaxed power generation and transmission systems.

In New York, 100-degree temperatures caused a subway train to derail after the heat stretched the track, forming a sharp angle.

Travis Long/The News & Observer, via Associated Press

Across the country, the heat has caused highways to buckle.

The *Christian Science Monitor* reported that "the cascading chain of secondary societal effects will range from higher utility prices and industry costs in the developed world to population displacements and potential political unrest in less developed regions".

In New Mexico, legislators can expect continued and increased demands for appropriations for firefighting, water system infrastructure, highway maintenance and reconstruction, and assistance for farmers hit by agricultural losses and residents who are or may become the next victims of wildfire. Proposals to ban fireworks will almost certainly resurface as well.

Wildfires in New Mexico appear to have increased in number, scope and ferocity. The record-setting Cerro Grande Fire, which burned nearly 48,000 acres and destroyed more than 200 homes in north central New Mexico in 2000, has since been eclipsed by more massive and destructive fires: Las Conchas in 2011 at nearly 156,600 acres, and this year's Little Bear (more than 240 homes destroyed) and Whitewater-Baldy (nearly 298,000 acres).

New Mexico's 2012 wildfire season is not unique. In Oregon, the Long Draw Fire (more than 550,000 acres in mid-July) is the largest in the state in 150 years. In Montana, a wildfire burned nearly 250,000 acres, and Colorado suffered two major fires that together destroyed about 600 homes. The direct and indirect economic impacts of these fires are in the billions of dollars, ranging from property losses and fire suppression costs to infrastructure replacement and lost tourism.

Additional Resources:

New Mexico Governor's Drought Task Force
www.nmdrought.state.nm.us

National Integrated Drought Information System
www.drought.gov/

USDA Drought Assistance Portal
www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=DISASTER_ASSISTANCE

New Mexico State University Drought Information
http://aces.nmsu.edu/drought/

This information bulletin does not represent a policy statement of the Legislative Council Service or its staff. This information bulletin was written by Gordon Meeks. For more information, contact the Legislative Council Service at (505) 986-4600.